



Voice of The Southern: Don't even think about slashing education budget

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Our View: Our lawmakers may be tempted to spread cuts across the state budget, but the best plan is to stay on target with Medicaid and pension reform.

Our state lawmakers are caught between a rock and a hard place as they seek budget cuts needed to put the state back on the road to fiscal responsibility.

Despite an unpopular income tax hike last year, the state's projected revenue of \$33.7 billion for fiscal year 2013 won't be enough to cover all of the state's long-burgeoning expenses. Significant cuts must be made and the two areas of most-pressing need are Medicaid and state employee pensions.

Gov. Pat Quinn has offered reform plans for both areas that aren't perfect — we're concerned about cutting reimbursements to health care providers and want safety net assurances for those receiving and about to receive state pensions. But the plans do enough to legitimately carry the "reform" titles. We're especially convinced of the need to immediately cut \$2.7 billion in Medicaid spending.

What's frightening now is the reluctance by some lawmakers to back the \$1 dollar-per-pack tax hike for cigarettes, a move that will bring in \$337.5 million and enable the state to collect another \$337.5 million in federal matching funds. Such reluctance ignores the clear link between smoking and soaring health care costs related to the habit.

If the cigarette tax plan isn't approved by the General Assembly, some means will need to be found to cut deeper into Medicaid or spread the cuts across the entire state budget. That might sound appealing, but anyone who ever has cut a budget knows the greatest amounts will need to be taken from the biggest departmental budgets.

Education is a big expense for Illinois and rightly so. As our state strives to improve its reputation for recruiting and retaining business — an essential for job creation — the budget for education should be spared the seismic cuts that will follow failing to meet \$2.7 million in Medicaid cuts. Business needs quality schools to provide a skilled workforce. The owners of businesses want the best possible schools for their own children.

It's the wrong time to be looking at cuts in education. Illinois State Board of Education Chairman Gery Chico said \$650 million in funding already has been cut from school districts since 2009. Chico said plans that would seek another \$250 million to \$750 million in cuts could be devastating in a state that already ranks near the bottom nationally in funding public education.

In just one example, looking at the potentially deepest cut of \$750 million from education, funding for Murphysboro Community School District 186 would be cut from a projected \$8.26 million to \$6.75 million. Chico said such cuts would force local schools to cut programs, eliminate teaching jobs or raise taxes.

This is no idle threat. The Illinois House of Representatives has approved spending caps for the coming fiscal year that would cut education by nearly \$260 million — even if the state successfully cuts \$2.7 billion from Medicaid. The other, more-dire possibilities could see education cut by \$500 million or \$750 million in a state already ranked near the bottom for funding education.

“If that happens, I just think it’s devastating to school systems,” Chico said. “This is going to mean that if we continue to cut education in the state of Illinois, it’s going to reach laughable levels.”

We simply cannot afford damaging our state’s future by cutting funds to education. We encourage our lawmakers to hit the financial targets needed for Medicaid and pension reform. It won’t be easy or pain-free, but the long-term costs of deep educational cuts could be ruinous to our state’s schools.